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The Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) and Gendered Grassroots Development in South-West Garo Hills, Meghalaya

Mr. Wenfield D Sangma[1], Dr. P. G. J. Richard[2]

[1]Research Scholar, Political Science, William Carey University, Meghalaya
[2]Associate Professor, Political Science, William Carey University, Meghalaya

Abstract:
Water is not only a basic requirement, but it is also a lifeline that determines health conditions, dignity and everyday survival**.** The Jal Jeevan Mission, with its vision of providing water for every household, has brought about beneficial change in rural India. In the South-West Garo Hills of Meghalaya, this mission is not only an infrastructure development initiative, but it is also a process of women and community involvement and grassroots development. It benefited the entire community, particularly women who had been responsible for fetching water from long distances and arranging it for their family's needs. After the implementation of JJM, women experienced relief in many aspects, time savings, and renewed confidence. Access to clean water has minimised hardship and enabled women to participate more extensively in education, livelihoods, and participatory community decision-making. This paper examined the relation between JJM and gendered realities. The paper also highlights the achievements and challenges of the scheme. Furthermore, the paper emphasises that water is not only a basic need but also a tool for gender justice, equality, and positive change.

Keywords: Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM), Gender, Grassroots Development, Women's Empowerment, South-West Garo Hills.

Introduction :

Access to safe and clean drinking water is still one of the biggest problems in rural India. In many rural areas, women have been responsible for fetching water from long distances and arranging water for their families' needs. This has a significant gendered burden that has an effect on education, health, and chances of personal and economic growth. The Government of India launched the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) in 2019, a significant intervention in this regard, seeking to deliver Functional Household Tap Connections (FHTCs) to every rural household by 2024. In Meghalaya, with a rugged landscape and scattered settlements, the implementation of JJM schemes faces huge challenges.

The South-West Garo Hills is one of the small districts of Meghalaya, which was formed on 7th August 2012. The district's total area is 822 square kilometres. Nearly one-third of this district is covered by hills, and the rest is plain areas. As per the 2011 census, the district has a population of 170794, which is spread out in the 542 villages (South West Garo Hills District | Government of Meghalaya | Administration | India, n.d.). The district has a largely tribal population and has a distinct culture and social background, which offers rich sources for understanding how JJM intersects with gender, development, and grassroots

change. This paper examines how the mission has influenced women's lives, reshaped social relations, and contributed to broader environmental and developmental goals in the district.

Jal Jeevan Mission in the Indian and Regional Context:

The Jal Jeevan Mission was launched under the Ministry of Jal Shakti with the vision to providing water security for all rural households. Unlike earlier supply-driven and infrastructure-focused schemes such as the *National Rural Drinking Water Programme (NRDWP)*, the Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) aims to change focus from infrastructure-based supply schemes to demand-driven, community-managed approaches. The mission prioritises source sustainability, greywater management, and the active participation of women in planning and implementation through Village Water and Sanitation Committees (VWSCs).

In the North-East, particularly in Meghalaya, the mission has encountered challenges that are unique in this region. The hilly terrains, seasonal water availability, scattered rural households, and poor infrastructure have hindered the implementation pace in this region. Despite these challenges, the South-West Garo Hills district, out of 47841 rural households, only 725 (1.52%) were connected with tap water connections at the time of the Mission's launch in 2019. Since then, an additional 42,331 households (89.84%) have been supplied with tap water, raising the total coverage to approximately 90% (43,056 households) as of August 2024. 304 villages in the district have achieved 100% household tap connections, while water supply work is in progress in 165 villages, and only one village remains where work is yet to start. Importantly, VWSCs have been formed in all 470 villages, with action plans prepared and human resources trained for operations and maintenance in 438 villages (JJM Dashboard, n.d.). This development scheme shows that the mission has begun to transform village life through the connectivity of tap water in the South-West Garo Hills district. The scheme has ensured that household tap connections to many villages in this district, bringing tangible improvements in health, sanitation, and living standards.

Gender and Grassroots Development through JJM:

JJM`s greatest contribution to South-West Garo Hills is its gendered impact. Fetching water has been a task for women and girls in their families, sometimes taking several hours a day. With the implementation of JJM, which provides tap connections for every household, women are relieved from their household work. The time saved is being reallocated to childcare, education, income-generating activities, and engagement in community institutions. This transformation has started to dismantle gender roles, providing women with new channels of agency and voice.

Secure access to water also improves women's health and dignity. The decline in waterborne illness was due to enhanced sanitation, which significantly improved women's well-being. In addition to improved health, water security enables women to be confident in themselves in family decision-making, and the Village Water and Sanitation Committee (VWSCs) is developing leadership opportunities. These changes in the region indicate that JJM is more than just a technical scheme but also a tool for gendered grassroots development.

Community Perspectives and Social Transformation:

The community of this district viewed JJM as a revolutionary project. For those families who previously depended on rivers and far-flung wells, now available in their homes. This has lessened the physical workload on women, provided opportunities for children, particularly girls, to go to school consistently,

and improved the financial status of the households. The tension related to drinking water enhances local social cohesión.

However, there are some households with unequal access to water in South-West Garo Hills. In this region, some remote villages, infrastructural problems and water source limitations still deny households an assured water supply. In such cases, women still carry the traditional load to collect water for their families. Moreover, while VWSCs have been constituted, women's membership remains nominal, influenced by existing patriarchal norms. Therefore, even as JJM has provided opportunities for empowerment, the pace and depth of transformation differ between villages in this district.

Challenges in Implementation:

Despite this scheme's achievements, the mission faces challenges in the process of implementation in the South-West Garo Hills. The geographical feature of hilly terrain adds complexity to laying the pipelines to the target villages and households because residents in this region are scattered, making maintenance of infrastructure challenging. Furthermore, seasonal variation impacts water sources, creating a fear of long-term sustainability. In this region, it was observed that many JJM projects are slow in the implementation of the project, and the reason behind could be Inadequate technical expertise and delays in fund flow.

From a gender point of view, although women benefit most directly from household connections of tap water, their active participation in decision-making and the technical process of water management remains limited in this district. Unless women receive more training, capacity building, and institutional support, their participation is likely to be symbolic, not substantive. Maintaining equity among marginalised groups and remote villages is another problem in this district that requires consistent policy attention.

Environmental and Justice Dimensions:

The development scheme, like Jal Jeevan Mission, also addresses broader questions of environmental and social justice. Through sustainable water use and conservation of the source, JJM promote environmental security. In the South-West Garo Hills, water management initiatives that are community-based have begun connecting water access to forest conservation and protection of watersheds. Such action is aligned with global commitments under the Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation) and SDG 5 (gender equality).

Simultaneously, water access not only meets daily needs for the household, but it is also a form of social justice. JJM minimises disparities that prevailed in this region by extending benefits to communities which were previously excluded. For women, reliable water access is not a matter of convenience but also brings dignity, rights, and equality, which they deserve. In this regard, this development scheme of JJM can be understood as part of a broader struggle for inclusive and equitable development.

Conclusion

The Jal Jeevan Mission in South-West Garo Hills reveal how a national development program can overlap with local realities to bring about gendered grassroots development. In addition to household tap water connections, JJM is a tool for change in women's everyday lives, making recieve education, better livelihoods, and community decision-making participation possible. It has enhanced health conditions, increased dignity, and begun to challenge deeply rooted gender roles.

However, there are several challenges that remain persistent, which are infrastructure, sustainability, and social norms. In order to fulfil the objective of the JJM scheme for grassroots development, more weight needs to be given to women's leadership, equitable access among marginalised groups, and the incorporation of environmental sustainability in water governance.

Ultimately, JJM in South-West Garo Hills is something beyond a water supply scheme. It is a testament to how access to a fundamental resource has the power to catalyse gendered grassroots development, making water act as a vehicle of justice, empowerment, and transformation.

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